

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

Confetti are traditionally almonds from Avola in Sicily's province of Syracuse coated in a hard outer shell of sugar. They are ubiquitous at many Italian (but not only) celebrations as a symbol of good fortune and prosperity. At baptisms the *confetti* are obviously pink or blue; at first communions, confirmations and weddings, white; at university graduations, red; and at wedding anniversaries, yellow for the 20th, silver for the 25th, aquamarine for the 30th, green for the 40th, gold for the 50th, and white again for the 60th.

When I first lived in Italy during the 1970s, there were numerous stores everywhere that sold *confetti* and their *bomboniere* (fancy sweet boxes). The name for these fancy candy containers derives from the French word for candy or "bon bon." These "boxes" were originally, in 18th-century France, made of silver, crystal, and porcelain, but in the 1970s predominantly of porcelain. Once filled with the appropriate *confetti*, the store elegantly packaged them.

Today there are few such stores left, probably because fewer Italians are getting married or marrying at a later age, and subsequently having fewer children, if any – not to mention that today's *bomboniere* are more practical: picture frames, keychains, salt-and-pepper shakers and personalized candles, for examples. Not to mention that pistachios, hazel nuts, dried fruits and chocolate can replace the almond as the filling.

Confetti are presented in several ways.

Customarily, wedding gifts, especially from close relatives and intimate friends, are presented in person so the future couple's families display on their coffee table a silver or crystal bowl filled with *confetti* plus a silver serving spoon. On that occasion, these V.I.P. guests receive their *bomboniera*. Since they're expensive, *bomboniere* are given to a special few.

On the wedding day, *confetti* in little voile bow-tied bags, known as *sacchetti*, or in little boxes can be used as place cards. Otherwise, the bride and groom go from table to table and distribute them to their guests at the end of the meal. The groom carries from table to table a silver bowl full of loose *confetti* which the bride serves to guests from a large silver spoon.

In each *sacchetto* there are always an odd number of *confetti*, and thus an undividable number – to symbolize

CONFETTI: ITALY'S SPECIAL-OCCASION CANDY



an undividable union. Three represents the Holy Trinity; five: health, wealth, happiness, long life and fertility; and seven because God made the world in seven days and there are seven sacraments.

Confetti were first mentioned by the ancient Roman gourmet Apicius. They consisted of an almond covered in a flour and honey paste. Instead, *confetti* as we know them today date to the 15th century when flour was eliminated and sugar cane replaced honey as the common sweetener. The earliest documents mentioning the use of

sugar cane and *confetti* are in the local archives of Sulmona, a small town in the Abruzzi, and date to 1492-93. Around that time, the nuns at the Sulmona's convent of Santa Clara started the tradition of tying together sugared almonds with silk threads of different colors to create bouquets of flowers, bunches of grapes, ears of wheats and rosaries, as gifts for young brides, noblemen, magistrates and bishops.

Today, glossy paper of different colors has replaced the silk thread and Sulmona, long been nicknamed "*La Città dei Confetti*" or "*Confetti City*," is still the center of Italy's *confetti* production, its streets lined with stores selling the above-mentioned *confetti* creations, but also ladybugs, butterflies, comic book and TV characters, to name but a few.

By 1846 there were 12 *confetti* "factories" in Sulmona, including the Pelino which dates to 1783 and is run today by the family's eighth generation, and the William Di Carlo which dates to 1833 and is run today by the family's sixth generation. An interesting family anecdote is that in the first decade of the 1900s, Alfredo Di Carlo immigrated to New York and worked at Tiffany's as a gemstone setter. To Americanize the family, he named his baby son William, but nonetheless soon sent him back to Sulmona in the custody of his Zia (Aunt) Chiara. Besides its "factory," Pelino houses a two-storied museum of its early machines, tools, publicity posters, awards, documents, family portraits and photographs, a collection of *bomboniere*, and the first telephone to have been installed in Sulmona.

Nota Bene: *Confetti*, which take two days to make, should contain no flour or starch. To prove its authenticity, place one in a glass of water. If the water becomes cloudy, it means that starch is present. A sugared almond without starch leaves the water clear! ○

